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## A REAL BASIS FOR LATIN COMPOSITION <sup>1</sup>

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The writing of Latin has fallen on somewhat evil days. Instead of the proud position which it once occupied and indeed which it continued to occupy for centuries, it has come to be hardly anything more than an adjunct to the study of the text—a drill in forms, vocabulary, and syntax. It may be said with truth, in this country at least, that teachers as a rule regard anything beyond this as impracticable and indeed not even worth the while.

Not only is Latin composition mainly a matter of drill, but in its subject-matter it is almost altogether dissociated from the pupil's life. Into the world which he creates out of his own experience, it does not enter; of it, it has virtually nothing to say. It deals especially with the things of which the learner knows only by hearsay, or with thoughts which come to him at second hand. Consider the vocabulary with which the beginner essays his first sentences into Latin. How remote are kings and queens and soldiers and swords and wars and battles, and even the much-talked-of Helvetians leaving their country with wives and children in search of fighting. Even when familiar objects are spoken of, they are transported to ancient times. The bridge, for example, is not the one which stands at the edge of the learner's own town or one which in holiday outing he has seen spanning a mountain stream, but it is a bridge over the Tiber, or the Rhine, or the Rhone. A little later the pupil is set to work on sentences which are translations or paraphrases of some Latin text, of which, perhaps, he knows nothing. I remember a sentence of this kind from the old Arnold: "Balbus and I raised our hands." I often wondered who Bal-

<sup>1</sup> A paper read at the University of California at the Conference of Classical Teachers for Northern California, July 2, 1909.

bus was and what reason "Balbus and I" had for raising "our hands," but I was destined not to know until I read the whole episode in one of Cicero's letters to Caesar concerning Trebatius. The context, however, may be known. In fact, in this country, since the publication of Collar's book on *Latin Composition* in 1889, the greater part of the work has been the retranslation of paraphrases of the Latin text which the pupil happened to be reading at the time. Whatever may be the merits or defects of this method of "basing the composition on the text," it has not brought the content of the work itself into any closer relation with the learner's actual life.

Latin composition has come also to be dissociated from the pupil's interest. This is due in some measure to the almost proverbial dullness of the composition books. Professor Brander Matthews is reported to have said of Swinburne, that the latter's ignorance of the Elizabethan drama must have been acquired: so much misinformation seemed hardly possible by the mere light of nature. One is reminded of this in looking over the composition books that come from the press. They are compact and business-like, and even scholarly, but usually of a dullness which, like the ignorance attributed to Swinburne, their authors must really have acquired.

This state of things has not come about by accident, but is the result of historical causes. We know that in the so-called Middle Ages the writing and speaking of Latin were of quite as much, if not of greater importance than the reading. The churchman, for example, might have comparatively little occasion to read; indeed, so far as the classical literature was concerned, the church herself often warned him away from that which had not already been lost. On the other hand he might at any time be required to write Latin or to speak it, and though the quality of his performance varied with time and place, he used the language as a living tongue for the expression of his own thoughts, and with a mastery which we may well envy. With the revival of learning and the recovery of the ancient literature, Latin continued to be the medium of communication for the intellectual and political worlds. Even in

the eighteenth century, in important fields, it was still the scholar's vernacular, and this was also to a great extent the case well on into the last century, to the first half of which belongs most of the work of that fine master of Latin style, Gottfried Hermann. A vivid illustration of this state of things may be found in the recently published *Life and Letters* of George Bancroft, the American historian, who tells in a letter to his father of his examination for the Doctor's degree at the University of Göttingen in 1820. The whole proceeding, including the translation and explanation of a large part of an ode of Pindar, was in Latin. A few days later he defended his thesis in public in a Latin oration. Another illustration might be drawn from the experience of Mommsen, to whom the Latin he learned and used in school became a second mother-tongue.

It has been said that it was in the revival of learning, with all the enthusiasm for the classical literature, that Latin really became a dead language. This statement of course refers to the fact that to this time in the writing of Latin belongs the anxious adherence to classical models, especially that of Cicero. This whole movement had in it the seeds of decay, not only because it aimed at what was bound to appear in the end as artificial and useless, but also because it tended to prevent the language from becoming the instrument of actual experience. In the decline of Latin writing we have also to take into account as a powerful influence the adaptation of modern languages to literary and scientific purposes, rendering the use of Latin more and more unnecessary. A third influence (which has not received the attention it deserves) has been that of philology itself. Toward the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, as we know, F. A. Wolf and his followers introduced a new conception of this science which has become increasingly dominant. Their idea, in a word, was that no subject of classical study (such as the Latin or Greek language) was to be regarded as an end in itself; it was to be a mere instrument for realizing the life of antiquity. Philology was to tear aside the veil and reveal to modern eyes men and women as they lived and moved in the ancient world,

and to this everything else was to be subordinated. The obvious result of this conception in the study of a language was to place the stress on reading and to diminish the importance hitherto attached to writing and speaking. Aside from practical considerations, hardly anything in the eyes of this theory could be less profitable than writing Latin for its own sake. All these influences have made themselves felt in the practice of the schools and have brought Latin composition to the subordinate and accessory position which we find it occupying today.

How can this position be improved? What seems to me to be needed in the first place is a change of attitude. The writing of Latin is not primarily a drill or the imitation of a text (with the foolish hope of absorbing its style); it is an exercise in learning how to express oneself in another language. As such, it is an end in itself, something intrinsically worth while. On this road the pupil may not go far (though this, of course, will depend), but whatever his progress may be, it will be real progress. In the meantime, he will have been engaged in a process whose value as an instrument of education is unquestioned.

If Latin composition is to become in any real way an exercise in self-expression, it is obvious that its material must be drawn from within the range of the pupil's experience. A rehashed Gallic War or Oration against Catiline will not serve our purpose; what we require is something which the pupil knows for himself or about which he has had his own thoughts. This is a large field, all of which we cannot hope to make use of; the question arises, To what part shall we turn our attention?

The answer depends on the kind of vocabulary which we purpose to employ. Is it well in the writing to have a separate vocabulary from the reading? If so, it is possible to begin with almost any phase of the pupil's environment. However, there are reasons (as we shall see) for connecting the composition with the reading, and for using the same vocabulary in both. The material then for translation into Latin may be such parts of the pupil's experience as can be expressed under this limitation.

It may be asked, can this be done at all? Is it possible to express facts and ideas of our everyday life by means of the words we find in Cicero and Caesar? It seems to me that it is not only possible, but that the full recognition of the fact ought to mark a turning-point in our teaching. The ancient world in its fundamental aspects was not so unlike our own; this fact makes it possible to adapt the language to corresponding contexts in our modern life. If we examine a chapter of Caesar we find that though the context be remote, the words themselves represent what is familiar, and that by taking them out of the relation in which the author placed them and by regarding them as so much raw material, as it were, it is possible to use them to express facts of our own environment. Thus *dare* and *accipere* are often met with in Caesar in connection with the giving and receiving of hostages, and *advenire* and *pervenire* to denote the arrival of Caesar or his army in some distant part of Gaul. For hostages we shall not have much use; *dare* and *accipere*, on the other hand, may be used of the giving and receiving of all sorts of familiar things, just as *advenire* and *pervenire* may indicate the arrival of all sorts of familiar persons. For another illustration take the intrac-table chaps. xxii and xxiii of Book II and consider how much material they contain for an account of a school excursion into the hills. It is, in fact, surprising how many things can be said without going outside of the vocabulary of the secondary authors.<sup>2</sup>

Let the teacher, then, having in mind a given vocabulary, make it the basis of exercises which shall embody phases of life familiar to the pupil—things relating to the family, the school, the town. When he begins a daily practice of this kind he will be in a fair way to solve the problem of Latin composition.

It will be found, so far as the pupil is concerned, that an exercise of this kind, instead of being a drudgery, has un-

<sup>2</sup> I have tried to show what can be accomplished in this respect in my *Book of Latin Prose Composition*, for the use of colleges and advanced classes in schools. Boston: Sanborn & Co., 1909. Professor Hale has used this method in his *First Latin Book*. Boston and Chicago: Atkinson, Mentzer & Grover, 1907.

failing interest from the mere fact that it is an exercise in self-expression. Its appeal is like that of drawing, or painting, or English composition; the product, as in those cases, has no particular artistic merit, but the fact that the pupil is attempting to translate a part of himself into a new medium gives to the process an unquestioned reality and vitality.

This method accomplishes far more than the old one in the mastery of forms and constructions. Not long since I saw a boy fishing, rod in hand, standing on the banks of a stream in the mountains, and heard him say to a companion, "I saw the old fisherman, and he said it was too windy for fishing." Suppose now that the boy on his return to school were concerned to translate this sentence (or one of a similar character) into Latin. What a glow of interest he would feel and what short work he would make of that somewhat difficult construction with *quam ut* in the second clause, not to speak of *ille* for the definite article in the first. This is only to illustrate the point that where the pupil has something to turn into Latin, which is interesting and real, the difficulties of grammar will soon vanish into thin air.

The difficulties of translation will also be lessened. We know that the significance a word has for the reader is built up of associations, but in a Latin sentence as a rule the pupil has no vital associations with the words. He learned them in the beginning in connection with the remote and uncertain things of ancient times, and they have remained more or less elusive, vague, and shadowy. It is not surprising that when combined in sentences they make slight and conflicting impressions, yielding but little meaning. But when these same words are used in writing to designate actual facts, he comes into living touch with them, and when he sees them again in a Latin text for translation, they have acquired a new meaning which in point of reality may approach that of the mother-tongue. This may be illustrated by the word *agmen*, which in its military sense the pupil often confuses with *acies*, having learned it in connection with the doubtful evolutions of Roman soldiers; but let him once apply it to a body of soldiers whom he has seen

marching in column through his own town, and the word will not only no longer give trouble, but will be full of significance in all its relations. In short, in language as in everything else, we must approach the ancient world through our experience of the modern one.

In putting this method into operation, the teacher may, as I have suggested, prepare his own exercises. What is really needed for practical purposes is a book written from this standpoint. Above all it should be an interesting book, with a keen, kindly, and humorous outlook on the world.

It is well at this time to re-examine all the traditions of our teaching. There is looming on the horizon a new educational philosophy. The old doctrine of *laissez faire*, still the official creed of our universities, having been found wanting in economics and politics, is destined to be superseded in education. In the new philosophy, education will be a conscious and directed process whose end is expertness in all the essential social relations. Before the bar of social utility every subject in the curriculum will have to answer. For classical studies this means a new test, which all those who love them must be prepared to meet.